

8-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Larson, K. (2010). More than Point & Shoot: A Look at Web-based Communication Strategies for Photographers. *Interface: The Journal of Education, Community and Values* 10(6). Available <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/article.php?id=706>

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Description

As an academic requirement for graduation at Pacific University, students are required to complete a Senior Capstone Project. The projects are held to a high standard and require thorough academic research. This article will present findings from my project, which focused on building and analyzing online communication strategies for my web-based photography business, ShutterSight Photography. The study focused primarily on social-media marketing, a networking and advertising experience that has earned much attention.

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Posted on **August 1, 2010** by **Editor**



By **Kenny Larson**

As an academic requirement for graduation at Pacific University, students are required to complete a Senior Capstone Project. The projects are held to a high standard and require thorough academic research. This article will present findings from my project, which focused on building and analyzing online communication strategies for my web-based photography business, **ShutterSight Photography**. The study focused primarily on social-media marketing, a networking and advertising experience that has earned much attention.

Introduction

With all of the would-be photographers out there, there is a growing number of people who would love to make money with their skills. With as much existing competition as there is, how does one stand out?

It's about more than just making good photos. What it takes is an effective communication strategy that fosters an engaged client base via the web. At the conclusion of the study, I found that there are three important components to any photography business: An attractive website, a blog, and a business presence on Facebook.

Website

It is critical for any photography business, web-based or not, to have a website. The truth of this statement is evidenced in the real-world benefits one receives from a well-designed website.

The first of such benefits is that it provides a 24/7 display portfolio for your work. My website was visited 1304 times in approximately 5 months. That would have been the equivalent of 1304 client

meetings to attend had this been twenty years earlier, before photography websites were commonplace. That represents a significant investment in time, money and energy to try and impress a client who may or may not choose to purchase my services after all. By making my portfolio easily accessible, clients can view it for as long as they want, and at their own leisure.

Also, the website provides a sense of legitimacy. My website is literally my storefront. My potential clients can see and experience my brand in the convenience of their home. Without a website, my clients would have to invest more time and energy to investigate my business and would more likely choose any one of my competitors who do have a website.

I constructed the website so that the best photos from various jobs are organized into a slideshow that automatically plays once someone arrives at my landing page. This is the most important part of the website because the first photo is what gets them to either look further into my business, or turns them off entirely. I keep the slideshow to ten images and constantly update the selection as I create more.

Facebook Fan Page

The Facebook page that I created provided the primary social media presence for our business. Though the website provided the storefront and business end for ShutterSight Photography, the fan page is the communication hub. It is a single point for information distribution where we were able to interact directly and successfully with our potential clients. By regularly interacting with them it engages them in our brand and creates a more personal experience.

Facebook also delivers very specific demographic information about my client base. When I started this business, my intention was to become an adult portrait photographer. I intended to shoot high school and college senior photos, engagement photos, wedding and events as well as portraits. Much to my surprise, 70 percent of my business has been child/baby photography.

The single largest demographic of ShutterSight Photography's Facebook fans are women between the ages of 25-34 (read on, young mothers). It is no less significant that the single largest male demographic is also within this age range. These are the people who are just starting families and are very excited to capture their children's images. Also, most of the people in this demographic are likely to have finished enough education to have a career and some disposable income.

The trend towards baby photography seems to be self-reinforcing and has forced me to specialize in this genre of photography. My clients, who are always very excited once they receive photos of their children, share them with family and friends. Many of these people are also mothers with young children, which in turn induces their friends and family to seek out my services, further perpetuating the cycle.

Facebook was also my primary advertising mechanism throughout this project. It provides both free and pay-for advertising services, both of which I utilized to different degrees of efficacy.

Free Facebook Advertising

The first form of free advertising is simply inviting friends from personal networks to become fans of the business and join the Fanpage. When one becomes a fan of a particular business, everyone in the joining person's network is alerted to this development in their own news-feeds. This makes them, at least on a very basic level, aware of my business.

The second form is the free advertising spot provided by Facebook. For example, say Tom, Dick, Harry and Mary are close friends. Tom, Dick and Harry join my fan page, but Mary does not. Every so often, when Mary navigates to her news-feed, there will be an advertisement in the upper right portion of the window that says, "Three of your friends like ShutterSight Photography." She sees that Tom, Dick and Harry are fans, and because she trusts their judgment she is curious and navigates to ShutterSight Photography's fan page. This leads to a "friends-of-friends" joining effect and now all of her friends—who may or may not be friends with any other fans of ShutterSight Photography—are alerted to her activity with the fan page, further perpetuating the cycle.

Paid Facebook Advertising

Due to my main client demographic, I thought it prudent to target my advertising at mothers in the Willamette Valley area. I used a pay-per-click model. After setting up the advertisement I set the maximum bid at \$2.00 and a maximum daily budget of \$8.00, which resulted in several tens of thousands of impressions a day.

When a person navigates to another page within Facebook or refreshes their current page, the Facebook servers run through a bidding process for all advertisements eligible for that particular ad slot. The ad that has the highest bid is presented in that slot. This is the "impression". The advertiser (me) using the pay-per-click model does not actually pay Facebook unless someone actually "clicks" on the advertisement, which navigates the person to the destination (usually a website). If my maximum bid is \$2.00, then my ad will continue to bid up to \$2.00. If I win at \$0.49 and am placed and someone clicks on that ad for that impression, I would owe Facebook \$0.49.

I ultimately spent \$110.53 in advertising costs using Facebook advertising. The average price-per-click was \$1.41. This resulted in roughly 440,000 impressions, meaning my ads were seen 440,000 times. From those impressions I received 77 "clicks", which navigated the interested parties to my main website. This resulted in zero jobs. These findings seem to be echoed in the real world when a businessman was quoted in The Wall Street Journal as saying, "My business has received millions of visits, but I haven't made millions of sales."

Unexpectedly, the free advertising proved to be most effective. I don't know that I will continue to pursue pay-for advertising until I become significantly more established. I believe that it may be the scale of my business that makes it financially unfeasible to pay for Facebook advertising at this time. Facebook is an important traffic generator for the ShutterSight Photography website.

15.5 percent of all traffic came directly from the Facebook Fan page. When combined with traffic first directed to the blog, and then from the blog to the webpage, that number jumps to 42 percent.

Blog

The ShutterSight Photography blog has proven to be an important asset for my business. Hosted for free through Google's blogger service, the blog provides another interactive stimulus for potential clients. The blog is where I post messages that would be too long to post on Facebook.

The most effective way to generate traffic for the website was to post "Sneak Peaks" on the blog following a photo shoot. I would take one of my favorite photos of the shoot and edit it first, then post the photo in the blog as a "Sneak Peak". Due to my client base, the subtext is written in a manner that is appealing to young mothers as well as grandmothers.

After the photos have been edited and the client has had them for a few days, I create a public gallery on the website with some of my favorite images from the shoot. I post an announcement on the blog with links to the gallery, and another one of my favorite photos from the session. Both the "Sneak Peak" and the "New Photos!" announcements are posted on the Facebook page.

What both of these blog postings do is keep the brand fresh in the minds of my potential clients. The Sneak Peak photos provide the additional function of exciting the client for the photos that are yet to come.

Conclusion

This project resulted in important findings: First of all, the website, Facebook fan page, and blog all provided important core communication functions for the business. Second, when it comes to online advertising and web traffic in general, views do not necessarily equal jobs.

I have discovered that many other companies are having difficulties leveraging a social media presence, and in some ways social media may be "over hyped".

Due to the relative newness of social media as a marketing medium, there is little scholarly research on the subject. Being that experiences like mine are not uncommon, I don't know that marketers as a whole have actually figured out social media marketing. Until the effects of social media are better understood, it will continue to prove both a boon and a hassle that cannot be ignored.

Resources

"2010 Marketing Trends Study Release." *Andersonanalytics.com*. (accessed 1 April, 2010). Anderson Analytics found that "70% of marketers are planning new social media initiatives in 2010". I still advertise my business as a portrait photography business that does the

aforementioned genres of photography, not just babies. Facebook has since changed this term to “like”. This is a recent development that happened after the conclusion of my project. This is the first page people usually see when they log into their Facebook accounts. It contains the status updates and developments or changes that people in their networks have experienced or done.

Sarah E. Needleman. “Entrepreneurs Question Value of Social Media — Marketing via Facebook, Twitter Yields Results for Some, Others Say It’s Overrated” *Wall Street Journal* 16 Mar. 2010.

“ShutterSight Photography Blog.” *Blogspot.com*.

Sarah E. Needleman

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